

January 3, 1958

Hon. Gaylord Nelson
Executive Offices
Madison, Wisconsin

Dear Governor:

First let me seize the opportunity to offer belated congratulations on your recent election, and to wish you every personal happiness and public success in your new office and for the new year. We have lived in Wisconsin for well over eleven years now, and although I am of course looking forward to my new situation at Stanford University I have many regrets to be leaving Wisconsin at this time. Politically, this was the darkest of decades, and it was always inspiring to see that we had people like Tom Fairchild and yourself as well as the McCarthys and Colemans. My only fear is that the exhilarating success of our party may begin to attract the same cynical opportunists into it as have dominated the Republicans for so long. But so long as the Party is represented by people like yourself, this fear is groundless. I know I will have cause to envy the good government my friends and erstwhile fellow citizens of Wisconsin will be enjoying.

The main purpose of my writing at this time, and I hope you will have occasion to think about this purpose after the rush of urgent budget business in the next several weeks, is to ask the support of your office on a piece of legislation affecting highway safety. Medical authorities and design engineers alike are agreed that the installation of SAFETY BELTS would ~~much~~ make a very appreciable dent in the incidence of fatalities from automobile accidents. Many of these fatalities, and of course many more non-fatal injuries, are due to injury to the skull and brain of drivers and passengers who are either thrown out of their vehicles or tossed about inside them, and impact against the pavement or parts of the car. It is well known that a well-supported human being can frequently survive impacts and decelerations that would otherwise be fatal. Knowing the tragedy of the statistics every year, it is hard for me to understand why there should be any considered opposition to the compulsory installation of seat belts at least in all new vehicles. Of course, this measure will not work miracles; it will not insure that the belts will always be used, there will still be some residue of fatal injuries, it would be awkward to insist on their installation in older ~~motor~~ vehicles, and perhaps most important this is only a palliative measure that does not reach the roots of the problem (presumably driver attitudes, though it is hard to be sure). On the other hand, apart from the few dozens of lives that can be expected to be saved in Wisconsin each year, the measure should help to dramatize the Safety aspect of automobile use, and it would be a sign that this State was showing leadership in another area of progressive legislation on behalf of its citizens.

In my previous correspondence on this subject with legislators, the former governor, and officials in the Motor Vehicle Department I have not observed any serious opposition to these proposals, though each branch seems to have felt that the initiative should come from another. This passivity perhaps accounts for the

poor showing that such a bill (sponsored by Mr. Bloodgood) received a few years ago; perhaps the fact that it was his bill, and that the Assembly was under Republican control had something to do with it.

I would like to ask you to take a personal interest in this measure, on behalf of the few dozens or more people whose lives may depend on it. Mr. Larsen, your Motor Vehicle Commissioner has all the technical facts, and he has written me that "The Motor Vehicle Department certainly endorses the use of safety belts. We are continually urging public acceptance and use of the belts through every public education channel at our command. You can be sure of the support of the department should you bring the matter to the ~~next~~ attention of the next session of the legislature."

But this situation, unworld-shaking as it is, clearly needs the leadership and interest of someone like yourself. I hope among your many other responsibilities you find some time to attend to it, and to bring a measure to the legislature that will have the expressed backing of your administration so that it is not merely overlooked.

My personal interest in this simply stems from an accident that befell one of my best research students a few years ago. Happily, (and almost miraculously) he did survive a very serious injury to the brain, but he is not the scientist he might have been. His accident, like hundreds of others was a model case where a seat belt would almost certainly have kept him from any serious injury at all.

With all best wishes,

Yours sincerely



Joshua Lederberg

(Professor of Genetics
University of Wisconsin)